PAUL'S FIRST JOURNEY

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The Gospel Goes Forth to the Nations (Acts 13–15:35)

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Introduction

The record of Acts 13–15:35 is more than a historical narrative of early gospel expansion. It is the Spirit's unveiling of how the gospel moved outward from Jerusalem and Antioch, how local churches were established among the nations, and how those churches were preserved in truth and fellowship at a critical moment. What begins with preaching and church planting in Acts 13 and 14 reaches a defining test in Acts 15, where the very meaning of salvation itself is brought into question.

In Acts 13 and 14, the gospel advances amid open hostility. Unbelieving Jews oppose the apostles, stir up persecution, and pursue Paul from city to city. Yet this outward resistance, severe as it is, does not corrupt the gospel nor fracture the churches. Far more searching is what follows in Acts 15. There, the challenge arises not from persecutors, but from believing men whose thinking remains governed by the former covenant. Salvation is no longer denied outright, but subtly supplemented. Christ is affirmed, yet no longer sufficient by Himself.

Acts 15:1–35 therefore functions as a decisive moment in the narrative. It reveals how the churches faced a doctrinal crisis that touched the heart of the gospel and resolved it without division, hierarchy, or coercion. One local church sends — the church in Antioch — and another local church receives — the church in Jerusalem. Apostles and elders fellowship together with the church. Truth is clarified under the leading of the Holy Spirit, and the churches are strengthened rather than scattered.

This writing seeks to present that pattern plainly. It is not an attempt to impress, persuade, or align with tradition, but to help believers see God's way as it is revealed in the New Testament: one gospel, one church in each city, and one fellowship preserved by truth rather than control. If what is presented here unsettles long-held assumptions, let it lead not to controversy, but to a fresh turning to the Scriptures and a deeper dependence on the Lord Himself. Our calling remains simple: to love the Lord, follow Him according to His Word, and stand for His testimony in our city — nothing more, and nothing less.

Preface — Not Catholic, Protestant, or "Non-Denominational"

In speaking of the churches established by Paul and Barnabas, it is necessary to be clear at the outset: this writing does not proceed from Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, or "non-denominational" categories. Such classifications belong to later centuries of Christian history and are not found in the New Testament record itself. Luke does not describe movements, denominations, or religious systems. He records the life and practice of the church as it emerged under the apostles' ministry.

When Luke writes that elders were appointed "in every church" (Acts 14:23), he is not referring to organizations, buildings, or denominational structures. He is describing the church in each city where believers had been gathered through the preaching of the gospel. Thus, "the churches of Galatia" were simply the church in Antioch of Pisidia, the church in Iconium, the church in Lystra, and the church in Derbe — distinct local expressions of one reality, not branches of a central institution.

Acts 15 further confirms this pattern. The church in Jerusalem does not function as a headquarters exercising authority over other churches, nor does Antioch submit as a subordinate body. One church sends; another church receives. Apostles and elders do not govern by jurisdiction, but serve in fellowship under the leading of the Holy Spirit. Even when the gospel itself is challenged, the resolution comes not through control, succession, or administrative power, but through truth made clear in the presence of the church.

The burden here is not to promote a new system or to condemn those within existing ones. It is simply to present what the Scriptures show: the local churches of the first century were the practical expression of Christ's testimony on the earth, preserved in oneness not by structure, but by life, truth, and fellowship. This is what the Bible reveals, and this is what the Spirit of God has never abandoned — though it has often been neglected.

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Paul's First Journey

Section 1 — Antioch of Syria

Movement 1 — Antioch of Syria: The Church that Sends

[1]Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. [2]As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." [3]Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. (Acts 13:1–3, NKJV)

Historical Background — Antioch of Syria

Antioch on the Orontes was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire, a bustling, multicultural hub of trade and culture. It was here — not Rome — that the first great Gentile work of the gospel took root, forming what Acts calls "the church that was at Antioch."

This is deeply significant. Acts speaks of "the church in Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1) and "the church that was at Antioch" (Acts 13:1) — singular — even though thousands of believers were in each city. Scripture never says "the churches of Jerusalem" or "the churches of Antioch." The New Testament consistently views all believers in a city as one church in that city.

This point cannot be over-emphasized, because many Christians today think of "church" in terms of multiple competing congregations, denominations, or independent groups within the same city. In God's eyes there is one universal Body of Christ, and its practical expression on the earth is local — one church for one city. This is not a matter of organizational centralization but of spiritual reality: the oneness of the Body safeguarded in every locality.

Exposition — The Spirit's Call

In this atmosphere of worship, prayer, and fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke:

"Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." (v. 2)

This is the first recorded instance of the Spirit commissioning an apostolic journey. Notice that the initiative came from the Spirit, not from a committee or board. The church responded by more prayer and fasting, laying hands on Barnabas and Saul, and sending them forth.

This is not merely an individual action — it is the church in Antioch acting in harmony with the Spirit. The local church and the Spirit together send out the workers.

Historical Background — Seleucia Pieria

From Antioch the two apostles traveled to Seleucia Pieria, Antioch's seaport about 16 miles away. This fortified harbor gave Antioch access to the Mediterranean trade routes. Its great rock-cut tunnel — built by Roman engineers to prevent flooding — still survives as one of the marvels of ancient hydraulic engineering.

Though Acts only notes this briefly ("they went down to Seleucia," Acts 13:4), this was the literal gateway of the Gentile mission — the point where the gospel first sailed beyond the Syrian coast.

Church Life Lens

Here we see the pattern for God's move on earth:
• One church per city — whether Jerusalem or Antioch — containing all believers in that place.
• Corporate fellowship and worship — ministering to the Lord, not merely doing business.
• The Spirit's speaking — guiding the church's action.
• The sending of workers — by prayer, fasting, and laying on of hands.

This is God's blueprint: the church in each city standing as the expression of Christ's Body, and from that local base the Lord's testimony spreads to other cities — resulting in more local churches.

Section 2 — Cyprus: Salamis and Paphos

Movement 2 — Salamis (Acts 13:4–5)

[4]So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. [5]And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Salamis

Cyprus, the home island of Barnabas (Acts 4:36), was a natural first stop for the gospel's advance into Gentile territory. Its copper mines, fertile land, and central trade routes made it a key Mediterranean hub. Salamis, the principal port city, had a large Jewish community with several synagogues, providing a ready audience for apostolic preaching.

Exposition

Luke emphasizes that they were "sent out by the Holy Spirit" — this journey is Spirit-initiated. Upon arrival they "preached the word of God" in the synagogues, following the divine order: to the Jew first, then to the Gentile (Rom 1:16).

The content of their preaching was Christ Himself — His death and resurrection as fulfillment of the Scriptures, the forgiveness of sins and justification by faith, and the call to repent and believe in Him as Lord. This is the gospel of grace, not of works or religious observances.
John Mark is noted as their assistant, showing that gospel work is done as a team, not by isolated individuals.

Sidebar: Believe and Be Baptized

"He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:16)

This verse does not teach that baptism itself saves. Notice that condemnation is tied only to unbelief — "he who does not believe will be condemned." Baptism is the outward confession of faith, not the means of forgiveness. The apostles preached salvation by faith alone (Acts 13:38–39), with baptism following as the believer's testimony of identification with Christ.

Church Life Lens

The goal of this gospel work was not simply to produce scattered believers but to lay the foundation for a local church in Cyprus. Every place the gospel reaches becomes a potential lampstand for Christ — a living testimony in that city.

Section 2 — Cyprus: Salamis and Paphos

Movement 3 — Paphos: The Sorcerer and the Proconsul (Acts 13:6–8)

[6]Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus, [7]who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. [8]But Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Paphos

Paphos, on the western side of Cyprus, was the Roman capital and center of the island's administration. The city was also famous for its temple of Aphrodite, making it a center of pagan worship and immorality. Roman mosaics still preserved there depict mythological scenes, showing the deep pagan culture into which the gospel was advancing.

Luke's reference to the proconsul is historically precise. In A.D. 22, Cyprus was transferred to senatorial control and governed by a proconsul — and inscriptions mentioning a "Paulus" have been found on the island, corroborating Luke's account.

Exposition

After traveling the length of the island, Barnabas and Saul arrive at the very seat of Roman power. Here they meet Sergius Paulus, described as an intelligent man who desires to hear the word of God. This is a remarkable moment — the gospel is being invited into the highest level of Roman governance on the island.

Standing in the way is Bar-Jesus (Elymas), a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet. His name means "son of Jesus," but his actions oppose the Lord's work. He seeks to turn the governor away from the faith — a clear picture of satanic resistance when the truth threatens to liberate someone of influence.

This movement sets up the confrontation that will follow in the next verses, when Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, speaks judgment that clears the way for the proconsul to believe.

Church Life Lens

Here we learn that spiritual opposition often intensifies when the gospel nears a decisive breakthrough. The enemy's strategy is to hinder key people from hearing the truth — because their faith may open the way for many others.

This reminds us that gospel work is not merely human persuasion but spiritual battle. The church's role is to pray and stand with those laboring, so that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified (2 Thess. 3:1).

Section 2 — Cyprus: Salamis and Paphos

Movement 4 — Paphos: Paul's Spirit-Filled Rebuke and Sergius Paulus' Conversion (Acts 13:9–12)

[9]Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him [10]and said, "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord? [11]And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time." And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand. [12]Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord. (Acts 13:9–12, NKJV)

Exposition

This is a turning point in the narrative — Saul is now called Paul, stepping fully into his mission to the Gentiles. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he speaks with divine authority, exposing Elymas as a "son of the devil" and pronouncing temporary blindness.

Elymas experiences physically the darkness he was spreading spiritually, while Sergius Paulus receives the light of the gospel and believes. The living word overcomes the opposition and brings life to the Roman capital of Cyprus.

The Line of Life and the Line of Death

This event shows the two lines that run through the Bible:
• Elymas is on the line of death, resisting the Spirit's flow, opposing the truth, and coming under judgment.
• Sergius Paulus steps onto the line of life, receiving the word and becoming part of the living stream of God's move.

Wherever the gospel flows, it divides — some resist and perish, others believe and live. This same stream that began in Jerusalem, passed through Antioch, now flows into Cyprus — carrying life from city to city.

Church Life Lens

The gospel work is a flowing stream, not a one-time event. From Antioch the stream flowed to Seleucia, from Seleucia to Salamis, across Cyprus to Paphos, and here a fresh spring bursts forth in the conversion of a Roman governor. The Lord clears away the obstacle, allowing life to flow unhindered into the capital city.

This is how local churches are raised up — as the living stream of Christ reaches new places, gains new ground, and establishes His testimony lampstand by lampstand.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 5 — Perga: A Change in the Team (Acts 13:13)

[13]Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem. (Acts 13:13, NKJV)

Historical Background — Perga of Pamphylia

Perga was the capital of Pamphylia, a coastal region in southern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). The city lay a few miles inland on the Cestrus River and was famous for its temple of Artemis (Diana of Perga), which made it a major religious center.

The route from Perga inland to Pisidian Antioch was difficult — a mountainous trek through bandit-infested passes, which may help explain John Mark's decision to leave.

Exposition

This verse marks a significant shift. Luke now begins to say "Paul and his party" (or "companions"), placing Paul in the lead role. Barnabas is no longer listed first — signaling that Paul's apostleship is becoming prominent.

John Mark's departure is mentioned without explanation, but later (Acts 15:38) Paul will view it as desertion. This moment introduces a human weakness into the story — even Spirit-sent journeys face setbacks and disappointments.

Church Life Lens

The Lord's move is not hindered by human failures. The stream of life continues to flow — even though Mark turns back, the gospel presses forward into Galatia. Later, Mark will be restored (2 Tim. 4:11), showing that failure is not final in God's plan.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6a — Pisidian Antioch: Arrival and Invitation (Acts 13:14–15)

[14]But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. [15]And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, "Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on." (NKJV)

Historical Background — Pisidian Antioch

Pisidian Antioch was a Roman colony and one of the most important cities of southern Galatia. Built by Augustus as a veteran colony, it had the rights and privileges of a miniature Rome, including a strong military presence. The city sat at a strategic crossroads, controlling access to the central Anatolian plateau.

Excavations have revealed paved streets, a theater, a forum, aqueducts, and a monumental gateway. The presence of a synagogue shows there was a sizeable Jewish population — a ready audience for Paul's message.

Exposition

Paul and his companions make the strenuous journey from the coastal plain up to the highlands, arriving in Antioch of Pisidia. As was their custom, they attend the synagogue on the Sabbath, where the service follows a familiar pattern: readings from the Law and the Prophets, followed by an opportunity for exhortation.

The rulers of the synagogue recognize Paul and Barnabas as qualified visitors and invite them to speak — a clear opening provided by the Lord for the gospel to be proclaimed.

Church Life Lens

The Lord opens doors for His word in many ways — sometimes through official invitation, as here. The key is to be present, ready, and in the flow of the Spirit. The stream that began in Antioch of Syria has now crossed into Asia Minor, and at this moment it is about to pour forth in Paul's first recorded sermon, laying the foundation for the church in Galatia.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6b-1 — Pisidian Antioch: The Call to Listen and God's Choice of Israel (Acts 13:16–17)

[16]Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: [17]The God of this people Israel chose our fathers, and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He brought them out of it." (NKJV)

Historical Background — God's Choice of Israel

Paul opens by addressing two groups: "Men of Israel" — the Jews — and "you who fear God" — Gentile God-fearers who worshipped in the synagogue but had not fully converted. This shows that Paul's message is already aimed at both Jew and Gentile.

He begins with God's sovereign choice of Israel, recalling the patriarchs and the exodus from Egypt — the defining redemptive act of the Old Testament.

Exposition

Paul's first words establish the foundation: God took the initiative. He chose the fathers, exalted His people, and delivered them "with an uplifted arm." Israel's history begins not with human striving but with divine election and mighty salvation.

This reminds the hearers that God's dealings have always been of grace — His purpose is carried out by His own power.

Church Life Lens

The story of the church begins the same way: not with human seeking, but with God's choosing and redeeming. Just as Israel was brought out of Egypt to be God's people, we have been brought out of the world to be His testimony. The stream of God's purpose that began with the fathers is now flowing toward its goal in Christ — and Paul is about to show them that Christ is the fulfillment.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6b-2 — Pisidian Antioch: God's Patience in the Wilderness (Acts 13:18)

[18]Now for a time of about forty years He put up with their ways in the wilderness. (NKJV)

Historical Background — The Forty Years

The wilderness period is one of the most sobering chapters in Israel's history. Though God had redeemed them from Egypt with a mighty hand, Israel often murmured, rebelled, and turned back in their hearts to Egypt (Num. 14:1–4).

Paul's phrase "He put up with their ways" (some manuscripts: "He cared for them") shows both God's patience and His provision — He bore with their failures, fed them with manna, gave them water from the rock, and led them with the pillar of cloud and fire.

Exposition

Paul's reminder would have been searching for his Jewish audience. Israel's history was not one of constant faithfulness, but of God's constant mercy. For forty years, God sustained a disobedient people and did not forsake them — a testimony of His longsuffering.

This history lays the groundwork for the gospel: if God bore with Israel's failures then, how much more is He patient now, offering forgiveness through Christ?

Church Life Lens

The church today also lives by God's patience and provision. Many times believers falter, complain, or turn aside, yet the Lord continues to feed us with Christ as our manna and guide us by His Spirit. The stream of God's purpose did not dry up in the wilderness — it flowed on until His people entered the good land. The same stream is flowing today, bringing us into the full enjoyment of Christ as our inheritance.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6b-3 — Pisidian Antioch: The Conquest and the Judges (Acts 13:19–20)

[19]And when He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land to them by allotment. [20]After that He gave them judges for about four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet. (NKJV)

Historical Background — The Conquest of Canaan

Paul reminds his audience that it was God Himself who destroyed the nations before Israel and allotted them the land — the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites (Deut. 7:1).

Though these peoples were greater and mightier than Israel, God promised to drive them out (Josh. 3:10) and fulfill His oath to Abraham (Gen. 15:16).

The period of the judges followed — about 450 years marked by repeated cycles of sin, oppression, repentance, and deliverance. God raised up judges as shepherds and deliverers to bring Israel back to Himself until the time of Samuel.

Note: Paul's Selective History

Paul's history lesson is not exhaustive — he moves quickly, leaving out many details of Israel's failures and battles. His goal is to trace the line of God's saving acts that lead to Jesus.

Everything in this section is God-centered:
• God destroyed the nations
• God gave them the land
• God gave them judges

This is purposeful — Paul is showing that God's hand has been directing history toward Christ. His aim is not to rehearse every event but to bring his listeners to a decision about the Savior.

Exposition

The conquest was God's work from beginning to end. The land was given as a gift, not earned by Israel's merit. Even during the turbulent time of the judges, God raised up deliverers again and again to preserve His people and His purpose.

This sets the stage for the coming of the true Deliverer — Christ, who will rescue not just Israel from her enemies but all humanity from sin and death.

Church Life Lens

Our inheritance in Christ is the same: a gift of grace, not something we earn. Like Israel, the church sometimes falls into cycles of weakness, yet the Lord faithfully raises up shepherds, teachers, and apostles to bring us back to the way of life. The stream of God's purpose does not stop — it flows on until His people fully possess their spiritual inheritance.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6b-4 — Pisidian Antioch: The Kings — Saul and David (Acts 13:21–22)

[21]And afterward they asked for a king; so God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. [22]And when He had removed him, He raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, 'I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.' (NKJV)

Historical Background — Saul and David

The transition from the period of the judges to the monarchy marked a major shift in Israel's history. The people's demand for a king "like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:5) was both a rejection of God's direct rule and a preparation for His ultimate plan to bring forth the Messianic King.

Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, was Israel's first king, reigning for about forty years. His reign ended in tragedy because of disobedience (1 Sam. 15). God then chose David, the youngest son of Jesse, to shepherd His people — a man after His own heart.

Exposition

Paul shows that even Israel's monarchy was under God's sovereign hand:
• God gave them Saul — Israel's choice but granted by God.
• God removed him — divine judgment on disobedience.
• God raised up David — His own choice, a man aligned with His heart and purpose.

David becomes the crucial link in redemptive history, because from his line would come the promised Messiah. This verse sets up Paul's declaration in the next movement: "From this man's seed… God raised up for Israel a Savior — Jesus."

Church Life Lens

The church today must also recognize that leadership belongs to God. He raises up those who are after His heart and removes those who turn aside. David is a type of Christ, the true King who fully does the Father's will. The stream of God's purpose narrows here, flowing from the whole nation to one chosen man — and through him to Christ.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6b-5 — Pisidian Antioch: The Promise Fulfilled in Jesus (Acts 13:23–25)

[23]From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior—Jesus—
[24]after John had first preached, before His coming, the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. [25]And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'Who do you think I am? I am not He. But behold, there comes One after me, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to loose.' (NKJV)

Historical Background — The Promise and Its Fulfillment

God's covenant with David included the promise of a future king whose throne would be established forever (2 Sam. 7:12–13). Paul declares that this promise is fulfilled in Jesus — the Son of David, the Messiah, the true King.

John the Baptist's ministry served as the bridge from the old covenant to the new, calling Israel to repentance and preparing them to receive the Messiah.

Exposition

Paul's message now reaches its climax: Jesus is the Savior whom God raised up. This is the purpose of the entire history lesson — to show that Israel's story points to Christ.

John's testimony underscores Jesus' greatness: even the greatest prophet of the old covenant saw himself as unworthy to untie the sandals of the coming One. Paul reminds his hearers that the fulfillment they longed for has already come — and it demands a response.

Church Life Lens

The church's message must always center on Christ. History, prophecy, and spiritual experience all point to Him. Just as John's ministry prepared the way for Jesus, the church today prepares the way for the Lord's return — calling people to repent, believe, and be ready for the coming King.

The living stream that began with God's choice of the fathers has now reached its highest point: the Savior Himself has come. From here the flow of life will spread to the nations.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6c-1 — Pisidian Antioch: The Word of Salvation and Israel's Rejection (Acts 13:26–27)

[26]"Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to you the word of this salvation has been sent. [27]For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning Him." (NKJV)

Historical Background — Prophecy and Fulfillment

Paul addresses both Jews ("sons of Abraham") and Gentile God-fearers, proclaiming that the word of salvation has now reached them. He then points to the tragic irony of Israel's leaders: though they heard the prophets read every Sabbath, they failed to recognize their fulfillment in Jesus — and by condemning Him, they actually fulfilled those very prophecies.

Exposition

Paul's words cut to the heart. The death of Jesus was not an accident, nor merely a miscarriage of justice — it was the outworking of God's redemptive plan foretold in the Scriptures.

The very ones who should have welcomed the Messiah became the instruments of fulfilling the prophecies of His suffering (see Isa. 53:3; Ps. 22:6–8). Paul is setting up the gospel message: what happened in Jerusalem was not the end, but the beginning of salvation for all.

Church Life Lens

This movement reminds us that familiarity with Scripture is not enough — we must recognize Christ in it. The church today is called to proclaim "the word of this salvation" clearly, showing that the cross was God's plan, not man's victory. The living stream of God's salvation is now flowing beyond Jerusalem, reaching the Gentiles in Antioch of Pisidia.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6c-2 — Pisidian Antioch: The Death and Burial of Christ (Acts 13:28–29)

[28]And though they found no cause for death in Him, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death. [29]Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb. (NKJV)

Historical Background — The Crucifixion

Roman crucifixion was the most shameful and excruciating form of execution, reserved for criminals and slaves. The phrase "hung on a tree" echoes Deuteronomy 21:23, which says that one hanged is accursed of God — Paul later uses this in Galatians 3:13 to show that Christ bore the curse for us.

The burial of Jesus in a tomb (Isa. 53:9) fulfilled prophecy and provided clear evidence that He was truly dead — not merely swooning or unconscious.

Exposition

Paul highlights three key points:
• Jesus was innocent — "no cause for death in Him."
• His death fulfilled prophecy — it was God's plan, not a tragic accident.
• He was buried — confirming the reality of His death before the resurrection.

Paul's summary is short but weighty: the cross is at the center of God's saving purpose. Every step was under divine control, even though it was carried out by human hands.

Church Life Lens

The church must never move past the cross — it is the foundation of our faith and our testimony. To proclaim the gospel is to proclaim "Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). The stream of God's purpose flows through the cross — there is no shortcut to resurrection life except through death with Christ.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6c-3 — Pisidian Antioch: The Resurrection and Witnesses (Acts 13:30–31)

[30]But God raised Him from the dead. [31]He was seen for many days by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are His witnesses to the people. (NKJV)

Historical Background — The Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of apostolic preaching. The phrase "But God" marks the great reversal — human courts condemned Him, but God vindicated Him.

The forty-day post-resurrection period was crucial: Jesus appeared to His disciples multiple times, ate with them, taught them about the kingdom, and commissioned them to be witnesses (Acts 1:3, Luke 24:44–49).

Exposition

Paul's entire gospel hangs on this declaration: "But God raised Him." The cross was not the end but the turning point. The resurrection confirmed Jesus' identity as the Son of God (Rom. 1:4), proved that His sacrifice was accepted, and inaugurated the new creation.

Paul appeals to the testimony of witnesses — the apostles who personally saw the risen Lord — as evidence. The resurrection is not merely a spiritual idea but a historical event.

Church Life Lens

The church stands in resurrection life. The same Christ who was raised now lives in His people to build His church. Every local church is a testimony that Jesus is alive — not just a community of remembrance but a living expression of the risen Christ.

The living stream of God's purpose, which passed through the cross, now flows with resurrection power — the very power that raised Jesus from the dead (Eph. 1:19–20).

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6c-4 — Pisidian Antioch: The Scriptures Fulfilled in the Resurrection (Acts 13:32–37)

[32]And we declare to you glad tidings—that promise which was made to the fathers. [33]God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.' [34]And that He raised Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, He has spoken thus: 'I will give you the sure mercies of David.' [35]Therefore He also says in another Psalm: 'You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption.' [36]For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption; [37]but He whom God raised up saw no corruption. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Scripture Proofs

Paul strings together three key Old Testament texts:

• Psalm 2:7 — "You are My Son, Today I have begotten You" — fulfilled in Jesus' resurrection, His public declaration as Son of God with power (Rom. 1:4).
• Isaiah 55:3 — "The sure mercies of David" — God's covenant promises to David are secured and guaranteed in the risen Christ.
• Psalm 16:10 — "You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption" — a prophecy that the Messiah would rise before His body decayed, unlike David.

Exposition

Paul shows that the resurrection was not an unexpected twist but the very fulfillment of God's promise to the fathers. David died and his body decayed — but Jesus did not see corruption. His resurrection is the proof that He is the promised King who will reign forever.

The phrase "glad tidings" signals that this is gospel proclamation — the resurrection is good news, not just a theological concept.

Church Life Lens

The church's faith rests not on speculation but on the sure Word of God. Every local church is a community built on fulfilled prophecy — the promises made to the fathers are now realized in Christ.

The stream of God's purpose has reached its decisive turn: death is conquered, Christ is risen, and His risen life flows into His Body to make it His living testimony on earth.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6d — Pisidian Antioch: Justification by Faith (Acts 13:38–39)

[38]Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; [39]and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Law and Justification

Paul's Jewish audience knew the law intimately. The law could define sin, expose guilt, and prescribe sacrifices — but it could not justify. Justification means being declared righteous before God — something the law could never accomplish (Rom. 3:20).

This is the first recorded time Paul publicly preaches justification by faith — the very truth he would later unfold in Romans and Galatians.

Exposition

Paul makes two great gospel announcements:

• Forgiveness of sins is through Jesus. This is not partial forgiveness but full remission, secured by His death and resurrection.

• Justification is by faith, not law-keeping. Everyone who believes is declared righteous — from all things — including those things for which the law had no sacrifice or remedy.

This is the heart of Paul's gospel and the great turning point in salvation history: righteousness is now apart from the law and available to Jew and Gentile alike.

Church Life Lens

The local church stands on this truth: we are a community of forgiven and justified people — not by works, rituals, or denominational rules, but by faith in Christ.

To recover the gospel is to recover the joy and assurance of salvation. The living stream of God's purpose flows here with crystal clarity: forgiveness and justification offered to everyone who believes.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6e — Pisidian Antioch: Beware of Rejecting the Message (Acts 13:40–41)

40 "Beware therefore, lest what has been spoken in the prophets come upon you: 41 'Behold, you despisers, Marvel and perish! For I work a work in your days, A work which you will by no means believe, Though one were to declare it to you.'" (NKJV)

Historical Background — The Habakkuk Warning

Paul quotes Habakkuk 1:5, originally spoken about the coming Babylonian invasion — a judgment so astonishing that people would not believe it even if told. By using this verse, Paul warns his hearers that rejecting God's message in their day would bring an even greater judgment: missing God's salvation in Christ.

Exposition

Paul moves from promise to warning. The good news of forgiveness and justification requires a response — to refuse it is to despise God's work.

This warning is not harshness but mercy: God gives fair warning so that people might repent and believe before it is too late. The most dangerous response to the gospel is not hostility but unbelief.

Church Life Lens

The gospel includes both promise and warning, and the Lord raises up evangelists, shepherds, and teachers to proclaim the whole counsel of God. The saints, as witnesses, live out this testimony together in oneness, so that the world may believe that the Father sent the Son (John 17:21).

The church in each city becomes a living testimony — not divided, but one — showing that God's saving work is real and urging all to enter the flow of His purpose rather than stand aside and miss His day of visitation.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6f — Pisidian Antioch: The Gentiles Beg to Hear Again (Acts 13:42–43)

[42]So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. [43]Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Eager Hearers

The first hearing in Pisidian Antioch did not end with indifference. The Gentiles (God-fearers and proselytes) begged for more, eager to hear the message again the following Sabbath. Between Sabbaths, many continued the conversation with Paul and Barnabas.

Exposition

Two responses emerge: eager request to hear more, and pastoral follow-up. Paul and Barnabas urge the new hearers to 'continue in the grace of God' — the very theme of the sermon. Grace is not a momentary feeling but a realm to remain in.

Church Life Lens

Healthy church life includes both public proclamation and personal shepherding. After the meeting, the workers help seekers to remain in grace — setting the tone for a church built on Christ, not on law or tradition.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6g — Pisidian Antioch: Almost the Whole City; Jealousy Arises (Acts 13:44–45)

[44]On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. [45]But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. (NKJV)

Historical Background — A City Stirs

News spread quickly; a near city-wide gathering assembled to hear the word. The sudden public attention provoked jealousy among some of the Jewish leaders, turning theological disagreement into open opposition.

Exposition

Envy, not zeal for truth, drives the resistance. When crowds gather to hear Christ, the flesh reacts. Opposition takes the form of contradiction and blasphemy — attacking both the message and the Messenger.

Church Life Lens

Expect that a clear, grace-centered gospel will draw many — and stir envy. The church must discern motives and keep its focus on 'the word of God,' not on crowd sizes or critics.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6h — Pisidian Antioch: Turning to the Gentiles; Light to the Nations (Acts 13:46–47)

[46]Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. [47]For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.'" (NKJV)

Historical Background — Light to the Nations

Paul cites Isaiah's Servant commission (Isa. 49:6). Israel's rejection does not cancel God's purpose; it widens the channel. The mission to the nations is not a plan B but embedded in Scripture.

Exposition

Note the solemn phrasing: 'you judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life.' To refuse the gospel is a self-pronounced judgment. Turning to the Gentiles fulfills the Lord's command — light to the nations, salvation to earth's ends.

Sidebar — A Turning Point in Paul's Ministry

In Pisidian Antioch, Paul declared: "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles." (Acts 13:46, NKJV)

This marks the first recorded moment where Paul and Barnabas explicitly announce a turn to the Gentiles. It is a narrative milestone in Acts, showing the gospel widening beyond the synagogue to the nations.

Paul's Pattern

Even after this declaration, Paul's custom remained to go to the synagogue first in each city (Acts 14:1; 17:1–2; 18:4). This was in harmony with the principle he states in Romans 1:16 — "to the Jew first and also to the Greek." The turn at Pisidian Antioch did not mean abandoning the Jews but affirming that the Gentiles were fully included in God's salvation plan.

Agreement with Peter

In Galatians 2:7–9, Paul recounts that Peter, James, and John recognized that the gospel for the Gentiles had been entrusted to him, just as the gospel for the circumcised was entrusted

to Peter. This was not an absolute division of labor — Peter also preached to Gentiles (Acts 10), and Paul continued to preach to Jews. Rather, it reflected the primary thrust of their ministries: Paul's was outward to the nations, Peter's to the Jews.

Conclusion

Acts 13 is rightly seen as a turning point, where the Gentile mission moves to the forefront of Luke's narrative. But Paul's practice remained consistent: beginning with the Jews, extending to the Gentiles. In this way, the gospel stream fulfilled prophecy — light to the nations (Isa. 49:6) — while honoring Israel's place in God's plan.

Church Life Lens

Local churches exist for God's global purpose. When one audience closes, the stream finds another channel. The church must be ready to carry the light beyond familiar boundaries.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6i — Pisidian Antioch: Gentile Joy and Jewish Opposition; Expulsion (Acts 13:48–50)

[48]Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. [49]And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region. [50]But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Joy and Opposition

Joy breaks out among the Gentiles at the announcement of God's salvation for the nations. Meanwhile, influential city figures are mobilized against the apostles, leading to expulsion — a frequent tactic when arguments fail.

Exposition

Luke links faith to God's sovereign grace: 'as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.' The effect is twofold — regional spread of the word and intensified opposition. The gospel advances while persecution rises.

Church Life Lens

A church founded on grace produces joy and witness. Even when authorities expel workers, the word continues to run. Persecution cannot chain the gospel; it often extends its reach.

Section 3 — Galatia: Perga and Pisidian Antioch

Movement 6j — Pisidian Antioch: Dust and Joy (Acts 13:51–52)

[51]But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and came to Iconium. [52]And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Shaking Off the Dust

Shaking off dust was a symbolic testimony (Matt. 10:14; Luke 9:5) that responsibility had been discharged. From Pisidian Antioch the apostles move on to Iconium along the Roman road.

Exposition

Rejection does not halt the work. The new disciples remain — marked by joy and the Holy Spirit — while the workers carry the stream of the gospel forward to the next city.

Church Life Lens

Churches are planted in joy even amid conflict. Workers may go, but the lampstand remains to shine. The living stream now flows toward Iconium.

Section 4 — Iconium: Belief, Division, and Flight (Acts 14:1–7)

Movement 4a — Iconium: Preaching and Belief (Acts 14:1–2)

[1]Now it happened in Iconium that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed. [2]But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Iconium

Iconium (modern Konya, Turkey) was a thriving city on the Roman highway system, linking Pisidian Antioch with Lystra and Derbe. It had a strong Jewish population and was known as a fertile agricultural center. The synagogue was the natural starting point for gospel preaching.

Exposition

Paul and Barnabas preach together, and the result is remarkable — a great multitude believes, both Jews and Greeks. This shows that the gospel has a universal reach.

But opposition quickly arises. The unbelieving Jews "poison the minds" of the Gentiles — literally "embitter" or "make evil-disposed." Satan always seeks to corrupt the stream of life with suspicion and division.

Church Life Lens

The church life advances through both preaching and opposition. Whenever the gospel is preached, there is both believing and contradicting. The living stream of God's purpose reaches Iconium and gathers many into Christ — but immediately the enemy seeks to hinder the flow.

This is a pattern we must expect today: wherever there is fruit, there will also be resistance. The local church must be steadfast and unmoved, continuing to speak the word with boldness.

Section 4 — Iconium: Belief, Division, and Flight (Acts 14:1–7

Movement 4b — Iconium: Perseverance and Boldness (Acts 14:3)

[3]Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Signs and Wonders

In the early spread of the gospel, God often confirmed His word through miraculous signs. These were not for show but as divine testimony to the reality of the message. In a city where opposition was fierce, God bore witness by His own power.

Exposition

Despite hostility, Paul and Barnabas stayed a long time in Iconium. Their boldness came not from natural courage but from the Lord Himself. The gospel they proclaimed is called "the word of His grace" — the message of salvation apart from works, centered in Christ.

The miracles confirmed the message but did not replace it. The center remained the preached word — God bearing witness to His grace.

Church Life Lens

Church life requires both perseverance and boldness. Opposition does not mean failure but opportunity for God to confirm His word. Signs may or may not follow today, but the principle is the same: the Lord Himself backs up the testimony of His grace.

The living stream flows not only through initial preaching but through continued endurance. Local churches today also need this steadfastness: to remain where God has placed them, speaking boldly in the Lord, trusting Him to bear witness.

Section 4 — Iconium: Belief, Division, and Flight (Acts 14:1–7)

Movement 4c — Iconium: Division in the City (Acts 14:4)

[4]But the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Social Division in Iconium

Iconium was a mixed city — Jews, Greeks, Romans, and native Phrygians all lived there. When the gospel entered such a diverse environment, it inevitably disturbed the balance. The synagogue would have been a central gathering place, so disputes there quickly spilled into the life of the whole city.

Exposition

The preaching of Christ always brings division. Jesus Himself said, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matt. 10:34).

Some sided with the Jews who rejected the message, others with the apostles who bore witness to Christ. Neutrality was impossible: the gospel demands a response.

Church Life Lens

The local church must not be surprised when the gospel divides opinions. To some it is the fragrance of life; to others, the fragrance of death (2 Cor. 2:15–16).

The living stream of God's purpose always encounters resistance, but this does not stop the flow. Division in the city only clarified who stood with Christ and who opposed Him — and the church is built on those who receive Him in faith.

Section 4 — Iconium: Belief, Division, and Flight (Acts 14:1–7)

Movement 4d — Iconium: Plot and Flight (Acts 14:5–7)

[5]And when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them, [6]they became aware of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region. [7]And they were preaching the gospel there. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Stoning as Punishment

Stoning was the Jewish mode of execution for blasphemy (Lev. 24:16). In this case, both Jews and Gentiles unite to try to silence Paul and Barnabas. The fact that rulers were involved shows the plot carried official weight.

Iconium sat at a crossroads of Roman administration, making disturbances there politically sensitive. Fleeing was not cowardice but wisdom — preserving life so the gospel could continue.

Exposition

The gospel had stirred division; now it provokes violence. Paul and Barnabas discern the plot and withdraw. Yet even their withdrawal is not defeat — they simply carry the stream of life to the next cities, Lystra and Derbe.

Notice the last line: "And they were preaching the gospel there." The work does not stop; it only shifts location.

Church Life Lens

Church life is not about clinging to one place at all costs but about following the Spirit's flow. Opposition may close one door, but the gospel finds another.

The living stream cannot be dammed — it moves on. From Jerusalem to Antioch, from Antioch to Iconium, and now to Lystra and Derbe, the Spirit carries the testimony forward, planting local churches as lampstands in new cities.

Section 5 — Lystra: Healing, Idolatry, and Stoning (Acts 14:8–20)

Movement 5a — Lystra: A Lame Man Healed (Acts 14:8–10)

[8]And in Lystra a certain man without strength in his feet was sitting, a cripple from his mother's womb, who had never walked. [9]This man heard Paul speaking. Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, [10]said with a loud voice, "Stand up straight on your feet!" And he leaped and walked. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Lystra

Lystra was a small Roman colony in Lycaonia, less cosmopolitan than Iconium. Archaeology shows it had few Jewish inhabitants and no synagogue is mentioned. This was raw Gentile territory — an ideal proving ground for the gospel's power.

Healing miracles in such places often opened doors where Scripture was not already known.

Exposition

Luke emphasizes the hopeless condition of the man — crippled from birth, never having walked. Paul perceives his faith and calls him to stand. The command is bold, the result immediate: he leaped and walked.

This recalls Peter's healing of the lame man in Acts 3, showing continuity of apostolic authority and the risen Christ working through His servants.

Church Life Lens

The gospel is not only words but also the living power of Christ. Where there is no synagogue, no Scripture, the Lord bears witness through deeds that cannot be denied.

The living stream reaches Lystra not through debate but through a miracle of life — a man raised from lifelong disability, now walking as a sign that Christ is alive and present in His church.

Section 5 — Lystra: Healing, Idolatry, and Stoning (Acts 14:8–20)

Movement 5b — Lystra: Mistaken for Gods (Acts 14:11–13)

[11]Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" [12]And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. [13]Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Zeus and Hermes in Lystra

Lystra had a local legend, preserved by the Roman poet Ovid, that Zeus and Hermes once visited the region disguised as mortals, but only one poor couple received them. Because of this story, the people were ready to see gods in human form when Paul healed the cripple.

Temples to Zeus were common in Anatolia, and Hermes was seen as the messenger of the gods. The crowd interpreted the miracle through their cultural lens, not through Scripture.

Exposition

The miracle meant one thing to Paul — confirmation of the gospel — but something else to the crowd. Without the Word of God as a guide, signs are easily misinterpreted. Barnabas is called Zeus, perhaps for his dignity of presence, while Paul is called Hermes because he spoke most.

Religious zeal quickly escalates: a sacrifice is prepared. Yet this is idolatry, not worship of the true God.

Church Life Lens

The church must discern how people interpret the gospel. Miracles and outward blessings can lead to confusion if not anchored in truth. Without teaching, people may mix Christ with their old religion.

The living stream reached Lystra with power, but immediately the danger of idolatry rose. The church's task is to turn men not to servants of God, but to God Himself.

Section 5 — Lystra: Healing, Idolatry, and Stoning (Acts 14:8–20)

Movement 5c — Lystra: Paul and Barnabas Reject Idolatry (Acts 14:14–18)

[14]But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out [15]and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, [16]who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. [17]Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness." [18]And with these sayings they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Tearing Clothes

Tearing garments was the Jewish expression of horror at blasphemy (cf. Matt. 26:65). Paul and Barnabas react violently against the idolatry being directed at them.

In Lystra, without a synagogue or Scripture foundation, Paul must appeal not to the Law or Prophets but to creation and providence as God's witness. This is one of the clearest examples of preaching to raw Gentiles in the New Testament.

Exposition

Paul's sermon contrasts "useless things" (idols) with "the living God" (Creator). Instead of offering theological argument from the Old Testament, he points to natural revelation: the heavens, the earth, rain, and harvests. God's goodness is His testimony to all people.

Yet even with this appeal, the crowd can barely be restrained. Religious excitement is powerful, but truth must redirect it.

Church Life Lens

The church must be careful never to receive glory that belongs to Christ. When men look to leaders as if they were gods, corruption and idolatry quickly enter.

Barnabas and Paul model a healthy reaction — horror at misplaced worship, redirecting attention to the living God. For the local churches, this is vital: Christ alone is the Head, the Lord, and the object of worship.

Section 5 — Lystra: Healing, Idolatry, and Stoning (Acts 14:8–20)

Movement 5d — Lystra: Paul Stoned and Left for Dead (Acts 14:19–20)

[19]Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. [20]However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Stoning as Execution

Stoning was the most brutal form of execution practiced by the Jews, normally for blasphemy. Here, Jews from Antioch and Iconium follow Paul and Barnabas, stirring up the Gentile crowd. Their hatred turns the same city that wanted to worship Paul as Hermes into a mob that stones him.

Dragged outside the city, Paul is left for dead — a stark contrast to the earlier miracle of healing.

Exposition

The same crowd that exalted Paul now seeks his death. This is the danger of religious excitement without truth: it swings from adoration to violence.

But Paul rises. Whether this was a resurrection or a miraculous recovery is not explained, but the effect is the same: the testimony of life over death. Instead of fleeing immediately, he returns into the city — a mark of courage and faith.

Church Life Lens

The flow of the gospel passes through both triumph and persecution. The church cannot live only in miracles and joy; it must also share in Christ's sufferings.
Yet the stream of life does not stop. From Lystra, Paul moves to Derbe, carrying the testimony further. The stoning shows that opposition is real, but it cannot quench the Spirit's move. Life always rises again.

Section 6 — Derbe: Many Disciples Made (Acts 14:20–21)

Movement 6a — Derbe: Fruit After Suffering

[20]However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. [21]And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Derbe

Derbe was a frontier city of Lycaonia, near the boundary of the Cilician plain. Unlike Lystra and Iconium, its exact archaeological site has only recently been located at Kerti Höyük in modern Turkey. Excavations suggest it was a modest town, but situated on a trade route that connected the interior with Cilicia and Syria.

Ancient sources describe Derbe as loyal to Rome and somewhat remote. Yet even in such an outlying place, the gospel took root.

Exposition

After surviving stoning in Lystra, Paul presses forward to Derbe. No persecution is mentioned here — only fruit: "many disciples." The pattern holds: wherever the gospel flows, it produces disciples, not mere converts.

Paul does not stay indefinitely but establishes a living testimony before retracing his steps to strengthen the earlier churches.

Church Life Lens

The church in Derbe is a witness that even small, remote places are not forgotten by God. The living stream flows to every city where Christ is preached.

Persecution in one city is followed by fruit in another. This balance keeps the work from despair on the one hand or triumphalism on the other. The goal is always the same: disciples gathered into the local church as Christ's testimony in that city.

Sidebar — The Fruit of the First Journey (Recap)

As Paul and Barnabas prepare to retrace their steps, it is fitting to pause and consider the work accomplished thus far. The gospel has flowed from city to city, bearing fruit despite opposition. Each city now stands as a testimony of Christ's life.

City by City

Antioch of Syria — The sending church, a model of one church per city, worshiping and fasting until the Spirit sent Barnabas and Saul.

Cyprus (Salamis & Paphos) — The word first preached in synagogues; the proconsul **Sergius Paulus believes** after Elymas is struck blind.
Pisidian Antioch — Paul's great synagogue sermon; Jews reject, Gentiles receive; **many disciples made**, but persecution drives the apostles out.
Iconium — **A great number of Jews and Greeks believe**; miracles confirm the word; the city divided, ending in plots of violence.
Lystra — A cripple healed, the crowd mistakes the apostles for gods; idolatry rejected; Paul stoned and left for dead, **yet disciples are gathered**.
Derbe — Quiet fruitfulness: the gospel preached and **many disciples made**, without mention of opposition.

Reflection

The journey has not been without cost — opposition, division, and violence. Yet in every city, the gospel triumphed. The result was not scattered believers but local churches: living lampstands of Christ's testimony in the Gentile world.

This is the pattern of Acts: the gospel flows as a living stream, and wherever it flows, it leaves behind the reality of the church in that city.

Sidebar — Elders and the Identity of a Local Church

Acts presents an interesting picture: Jerusalem and the four Galatian cities have elders explicitly appointed, yet Antioch — the second great church after Jerusalem — is never said to have elders. What are we to make of this?

Jerusalem — Elders Early On

The church in Jerusalem had elders recognized quite early. Relief from Antioch was delivered "to the elders" (Acts 11:30), and the apostles and elders together considered the circumcision issue (Acts 15:2). Elders were firmly in place.

Antioch — A Church Without Mentioned Elders

Antioch is repeatedly called "the church that was at Antioch" (Acts 11:26; 13:1; 14:27; 15:1). Leaders are described as prophets and teachers (Acts 13:1), but elders are never mentioned explicitly. Even when a delegation is sent to Jerusalem (Acts 15), Luke does not refer to Antioch's elders, only to Paul, Barnabas, and others.

Why the Silence?

• Luke's focus is thematic: Antioch as the missionary-sending base, not its internal government.
• Elders may well have existed, but Acts is selective in its record.
• As a Gentile-majority church, Antioch's development may have differed from Jerusalem's.

The Church Defined by Believers, Not Elders

The absence of elders does not mean Antioch was not a church. In the New Testament, a local church is defined by the believers in that city — "the church in Antioch," "the church in Jerusalem" — regardless of numbers or maturity.
Elders are vital for shepherding and oversight (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), but they are not what make a church a church. They strengthen and care for what already exists.

Conclusion

Acts shows both realities: churches exist as soon as believers are gathered in a city, and elders are later established to provide care and order. Antioch proves the point: a church in full standing, even before Luke mentions elders.

Section 7 — The Return Trip: Strengthening and Appointing Elders (Acts 14:21–23)

Movement 7b — Appointing Elders in Every Church (Acts 14:23)

[23]So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Elders in the Ancient World

The concept of elders was familiar in both Jewish and Gentile settings. In the synagogue, elders gave oversight and guidance to the community. In Greek and Roman cities, local councils of elders (gerousia, presbyters) often administered civic life. Thus, the role of spiritual elders in the church was culturally understandable, though transformed by Christ's headship.

Exposition

Notice the sequence: disciples are made (v. 21), strengthened (v. 22), and then elders are appointed (v. 23). This shows that elders were not imposed instantly, but recognized once there was a body of believers in each city.

The appointment is accompanied by prayer and fasting — seeking the Spirit's confirmation. Paul and Barnabas then commended them to the Lord, acknowledging that the ultimate shepherd is Christ Himself (cf. 1 Pet. 5:4).

Importantly, Luke shifts language here: what were previously "disciples" are now explicitly "churches." Elders confirm that a local church is not just a loose collection of believers but an established testimony with shepherding and oversight.

What "In Every Church" Really Means

When Luke records that Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders in every church" (Acts 14:23), he was not talking about St. Mary's Catholic Church, St. Joseph's Orthodox Church, Winding River Chapel, or Full Redemption Fellowship. Such categories did not exist in the first century.

"In every church" meant this: wherever believers were gathered in a city, that was the church in that city. Thus the "churches of Galatia" (Gal. 1:2) were simply:

- **The church in Antioch of Pisidia**
- **The church in Iconium**
- **The church in Lystra**
- **The church in Derbe**

Not four competing congregations in one town, but four cities, each with its own church. This matches the same divine pattern in Revelation: "To the church in Ephesus… Smyrna… Pergamum…" (Rev. 2–3).

If the Lord had told Paul, "Write in a book the visions you have seen and send it to the churches of Galatia," the book would have gone to these four churches — nothing more, nothing less.

This is the New Testament reality. The church is one universal Body expressed in many localities. The divisions of Christendom — denominational names, sects, and rival congregations in the same city — are foreign to the Bible and obscure the simplicity of God's way.

To recover this vision is to recover the church as God originally intended.

Historical Background — Antioch of Pisidia in Galatia

The Antioch of Acts 13–14 is Antioch of Pisidia, a city in the highlands of Asia Minor. Although it bore the name "Pisidia," the Romans had redrawn provincial boundaries in 25 BC, placing Antioch and surrounding regions into the province of Galatia.

This explains why Paul later writes to "the churches of Galatia" (Gal. 1:2). The churches founded on this first journey — Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe — were all within Galatia at that time.

Thus, Luke's phrase "in every church" (Acts 14:23) refers to these newly established local churches in Galatia, and Paul's later letter addressed them collectively as the churches of Galatia.

Church Life Lens

This verse reveals the New Testament pattern:
• One church in each city, never multiple churches in the same city.
• Elders in every church, ensuring care, teaching, and discipline.
• Dependence on the Lord, for even with elders, Christ remains the Head and Shepherd.

Elders are not a matter of hierarchy but of service — to protect the flock, uphold the Word, and safeguard the oneness of the Body.

The local church is the practical expression of Christ's Body, and elders are the Spirit's provision to keep that expression healthy and strong.

Section 7 — The Return Trip: Strengthening and Appointing Elders (Acts 14:21–23)

Movement 7c — Commending Them to the Lord (Acts 14:23b; Titus 1:5)

[23] …and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (NKJV)
"For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you." (Titus 1:5, NKJV)

Exposition

Paul and Barnabas concluded their work not by centralizing authority but by commending the believers to the Lord. Christ Himself is the Shepherd and Overseer of the churches. Elders were raised up, but the churches were entrusted to Him.

This is confirmed by Paul's later instruction to Titus: just as elders were appointed in every church, Titus was to appoint elders in every city. The New Testament consistently presents this divine pattern.

The Nature of Eldership

• **Plurality**: In every church, Luke says "elders" (plural). There is no example of a single elder ruling over a church. Leadership was always shared among a group of qualified men.
• **Male Role**: The qualifications given in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 assume male elders ("the husband of one wife"), consistent with the apostolic pattern.
• **Elder = Bishop = Pastor: The New Testament uses these terms interchangeably**:

- **Elder (presbyteros)** — emphasizing maturity.
- **Bishop/Overseer (episkopos)** — emphasizing function of oversight.
- **Pastor/Shepherd (poimēn)** — emphasizing care for the flock.

They are not three offices, but three aspects of the same role.

Church Life Lens

The appointment of elders ensured that each local church had shepherds, overseers, and mature brothers caring for it. Yet even then, the apostles commended them not to the elders but to the Lord.

This balance is vital: the plurality of elders safeguards against hierarchy, while dependence on the Lord preserves Christ as the Head. In every city there was one church, in every church a plurality of elders, and over all, Christ Himself.

Section 8 — The Report to the Sending Church (Acts 14:24–28)

Movement 8a — Returning Through Pisidia and Pamphylia (Acts 14:24–25)

[24]And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. [25]Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Perga and Attalia

• Perga was the capital of Pamphylia, known for its temple of Artemis and famous stadium. Earlier, Paul had passed through here on the way inland (Acts 13:13), but no preaching was recorded at that time. Now, on the return, Luke notes that they preached the word in Perga.

• Attalia (modern Antalya) was the coastal port founded by Attalus II of Pergamum. It became the launching point for their return voyage to Antioch in Syria.

Exposition

The apostles retrace their steps, not only to strengthen disciples but also to sow fresh seed where the word had not yet been preached. Perga, overlooked on the outward leg, is now given attention. The Spirit wastes nothing: every city on the route receives the gospel.

Attalia becomes the exit point, the final Gentile city touched on this journey. From here, the mission circle closes as they sail back to Antioch.

Church Life Lens

Faithful workers do not leave gaps in their labor. Paul and Barnabas preach where they had not previously, showing thoroughness in the spread of the gospel.

The living stream touched every city along the way, leaving behind either disciples or a clear testimony. Even transitional places like Perga and Attalia were not bypassed in God's plan.

Section 8 — The Report to the Sending Church (Acts 14:24–28)

Movement 8b — The Report to Antioch (Acts 14:26–28)

[26]From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. [27]Now when they had come and gathered the

church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. [28]So they stayed there a long time with the disciples. (NKJV)

Historical Background — Antioch as Mission Base

Antioch in Syria, the third largest city of the empire, was where the Spirit first sent Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:1–3). Now it receives them back. Unlike Jerusalem, which was the root, Antioch was the base — the first Gentile-majority church and the center of missionary expansion.
This cycle (sent, labor, return, report) became the pattern for apostolic journeys.

Exposition

Paul and Barnabas are careful to gather the whole church, not just leaders or a small group. The mission was not theirs alone but a work entrusted to the church and carried out by God's grace.

Their report emphasizes two points:

1. "All that God had done with them" — the work is attributed to God, not human skill.
2. "That He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" — the decisive theological outcome of the journey. God Himself validated the inclusion of the nations.

The apostles then remained in Antioch "a long time," strengthening the base church that had sent them.

Church Life Lens — The Whole Church Together

Acts 14:27 says that Paul and Barnabas "gathered the church together." This is not a small phrase. Even in a large city like Antioch, with a great multitude of believers, Scripture still speaks of the church in Antioch — one church in one city.

When the apostles returned, they did not report to a board, a committee, or a fraction of the believers, but to the whole church gathered together.

Paul later used the same language in Corinth: "when you come together as a church" (1 Cor. 11:18), "if the whole church comes together in one place" (1 Cor. 14:23).

This is the divine pattern: the local church in a city is one, and it can gather as one. To recover this vision today means laying aside traditions of division and realizing again what the New Testament reveals — the church is universal in essence, but local in practice. One Body, one Spirit, one church in every city.

Section 9 — The Fellowship of the Churches (Acts 15:1–35)

A Challenge from Within

The events recorded in Acts 15:1–35 arise directly from the work accomplished in Acts 13 and 14. The gospel had gone forth to the Gentiles, local churches had been established in multiple cities, and elders had been appointed among the saints. **What now emerges is not opposition from the world, but a challenge from within — one that tests the very foundation of salvation and the oneness of the church.**

The controversy begins in Antioch, the same church that had sent Paul and Barnabas forth. Certain men came down from Judea and taught the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). **This challenge is striking not because it comes from unbelief, but because it comes from a believing element whose thinking remains attached to the former order. Christ is not denied, yet He is no longer sufficient by Himself. Salvation is quietly redefined, and grace is displaced by necessity.**

Sent by the Church, Received by the Church

Paul and Barnabas do not treat this as a secondary issue. Luke records that there was "no small dissension and dispute" (Acts 15:2). Yet the church in Antioch does not attempt to resolve the matter independently, nor does it suppress it for the sake of outward peace. Instead, the matter is brought into fellowship. Luke records:

"So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all things that God had done with them" (Acts 15:3–4).

Luke's description leaves no impression of a headquarters church exercising authority over other churches. One local church sends — the church in Antioch — and another local church receives — the church in Jerusalem. Authority is expressed through fellowship under the Spirit, not through jurisdiction. The New Testament gives no example of responsible or influential leading ones exercising control over other churches or believers beyond persuasion in truth. Where influence hardens into control, fellowship is quietly replaced by management — a principle entirely absent from Acts 15.

The Gospel Clarified in Fellowship

Yet the issue is raised again — not by opponents of Christ, but by believers. Luke records, "Some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses'" (Acts 15:5). Luke's wording is precise and searching. These were believing ones, yet their thinking remained governed by an inherited religious system. Genuine belief did not automatically free them from the former order. Without revelation, the old way quietly asserted itself within the new, pressing necessity where God had established grace.

The apostles and elders come together to consider the matter. Peter rises and appeals not to tradition or authority, but to God's own action. God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles, made no distinction between them and the Jews, and purified their hearts by faith. To impose the law now would be to place a yoke upon the disciples that neither their fathers nor they themselves were able to bear. His conclusion is decisive and leveling: "We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they" (Acts 15:11).

Paul and Barnabas then speak, declaring how God had worked signs and wonders among the Gentiles through them. Their testimony is not theoretical, but experiential — God Himself has borne witness to the gospel they preached. James follows by confirming that this work accords with the Scriptures, showing that God had always intended to take from the Gentiles a people for His name.

What is most remarkable is not merely the doctrinal clarity that emerges, but the way it emerges. The decision is not imposed by rank, nor forced by majority opinion. It arises from fellowship under the leading of the Holy Spirit. A letter is composed and sent to the Gentile believers, affirming that those who troubled them had done so without authorization and declaring, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden" (Acts 15:28). Authority here is expressed not as control, but as harmony with the Spirit's mind.

Truth Preserved Without Division

When the letter is delivered to Antioch, the believers rejoice over its encouragement. Judas and Silas, themselves prophets, exhort and strengthen the brothers, and peace is restored. The truth of the gospel is safeguarded, and the fellowship between the churches is preserved.

This outcome is extraordinary. A challenge to the gospel arises from within the believing community itself, touching the heart of salvation, yet the matter is resolved without division. No rival fellowships are formed. No parallel works emerge. No churches withdraw from one another. Truth is preserved, and the oneness of the church remains intact.

Acts 15:1–35 thus completes the first journey in a vital and revealing way. What was begun outwardly through preaching and church planting is now secured inwardly through truth and fellowship. Christ is upheld as fully sufficient. The churches are protected from distortion. The oneness of the church is maintained without hierarchy or coercion. Only after this foundation is firmly laid does Luke proceed to record a new movement of the work.

This portion of Acts stands as a searching testimony. It reveals a way of handling doctrinal crisis that is almost entirely absent from contemporary Christian experience. The ease with which division and control are accepted today stands in stark contrast to the apostolic pattern recorded here. Acts 13–15:35 does not merely inform; it exposes how far later Christianity has drifted from the Spirit-governed fellowship that marked the beginning.

Concluding Reflections on Paul's Further Journeys

Paul's first journey (Acts 13–14) planted the seeds of the gospel across the cities of southern Galatia—Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe—cities once bound in idolatry but now containing a local church in each place: the church in Antioch, the church in Iconium, the church in Lystra, and the church in Derbe. Each was a local expression of the one universal Body of Christ, established through the apostles' ministry and strengthened by the appointing of elders in every church (Acts 14:23).

Paul wrote his earliest epistle, **Galatians**, shortly after this first journey—very likely from Antioch and after the gathering of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem (Acts 15). It was addressed directly to these Galatian churches, defending the gospel of grace and calling the believers back to the simplicity of Christ.

It is important to see that the apostles never established "the church of a city," as if the city owned or defined the church, but always the church in that city—the believers gathered as Christ's expression where they lived. Likewise, the New Testament never speaks of "churches in a city," but consistently of the church in a city: one church in one locality, the singular expression of the one Body of Christ in that place. This pattern follows the scriptural boundary of locality, which marks the sphere of fellowship but never makes the church the possession of the locality itself.

Against this backdrop, Paul's further journeys reveal the purity and consistency of the original pattern. **His second journey** (Acts 15:36–18:22) stretched westward under the Spirit's leading. After revisiting the Galatian churches, a vision at Troas drew him into Macedonia (Acts 16:9–10). Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea were touched by the gospel—Berea with unusual readiness of heart (Acts 17:11–12), though Scripture is silent on whether a church was formally established there. Athens received only a few believers (Acts 17:32–34). But in Corinth, where Paul remained for a year and a half (Acts 18:11), the Lord gathered a substantial people and raised up a strong, though troubled, local church. **During this stay, Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians**, strengthening the young believers he had left in Macedonia.

Paul's third journey (Acts 18:23–21:17) centered on Ephesus, where he remained nearly three years (Acts 19:8–10; 20:31), teaching and shepherding daily. From this key city the word of the Lord spread through all Asia (Acts 19:10), likely giving rise to the churches later addressed in Revelation. **During this period Paul wrote several major epistles: 1 Corinthians** from Ephesus**, 2 Corinthians** from Macedonia**,** and **Romans** from Corinth**.**

Paul's fourth journey (Acts 21–28) unfolded under the constraint of chains. Arrested in Jerusalem, confined in Caesarea, and sent to Rome after appealing to Caesar, he traveled as a prisoner through storm and shipwreck until he reached the heart of the empire. Yet in Rome, though outwardly bound, he preached "without hindrance" (Acts 28:31). **During this first Roman imprisonment he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon**—letters unveiling Christ in His fullness and the church in her heavenly reality.

After the close of Acts, Paul appears to have been released, beginning a final, post-Acts journey. He left Titus in Crete to appoint elders in every city (Titus 1:5), urged Timothy to remain in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3), and traveled through Macedonia and other regions. **During this period he wrote 1 Timothy and Titus.** But soon he was arrested again—this time placed in a Roman dungeon. **His final epistle, 2 Timothy**, bears the weight of his last days—loneliness, abandonment by many, and unwavering hope in the Lord. Shortly after writing it, he poured out his life as a martyr.

Thus, from the first journey to the final imprisonment, Paul's course reveals one divine pattern: local churches raised up city by city, each the expression of the one Body of Christ, through the ministry of a man wholly given to God's eternal purpose. And it must be said plainly for the reader's sake: the apostles established one church in each city—not "churches" in a city, and never "the church of" a city—just as every regenerated believer is in the world but never of it.